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Sorry, Kids, Game's Over

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As a former high school and college athlete, Julie Kennedy, a 1993 Georgetown University graduate, is involved these days in a part of the sports world she knew little about: money management, grant writing, reseeding fields, locating vans for travel, pricing uniforms and scheduling games. In ways she never imagined, as well as measured by success, she has become a pro at it.

Kennedy, on the faculty of the Marie H. Reed Learning Center in the Adams-Morgan area of the capital, team-teaches first grade to 26 children. Twenty of them speak Spanish as a first language. Nearly all are in the school breakfast and lunch program. In her second year at the elementary school, she is a member of Teach for America, the New York-based program that recruits, trains and assigns teachers—mostly recent college graduates—for urban and rural public schools.

After getting a feel for Reed and the captivating multiculture of the neighborhood, Kennedy noticed that in addition to living with every other impoverishment that plagues Washington and the nation's inner-city schools, her kids had little outlet for after-school play. "They would often hang out on the streets with little to do," she says. "So I thought, why not a soccer program? It was a logical move for me. It's a sport I've played all my life."

At this point, she could have agonized or organized. She chose the second, and now Reed, a well-regarded school, has a soccer team for its fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade girls. Kennedy is like the young rabbi in Paddy Chayefsky's play, "The Tenth Man," who tells his new congregation that the best way to develop the spiritual life of the community is organize a sports team.

Last fall, 90 players guided by nine coaches at five public elementary schools became the core of what Kennedy began: the D.C. Public Schools Girls Soccer League. She learned how to beg, borrow and deal. Covering ground like a mid-

fielder, she went to such groups as World Cup '94—the international soccer organization—Howard and Georgetown universities, a local soccer league, a Methodist church, a sporting goods store and a supermarket for help. They responded with services and donations, including five fields seeded into playing conditions complete with lines and goals, 70 soccer balls, medical checkups for players, use of a van and oranges from Safeway for all practices and games.

The story of this resourceful and caring teacher might end here except that the kind of idealism she practices could come to nothing if some political leaders have their negative way. "I am totally opposed to national service," House Speaker Newt Gingrich has announced. "It is coerced voluntarism. . . . It's gimmickry."

Kennedy and 940 other members of Teach for America are under siege because they are part of AmeriCorps, the object of Gingrich's scorn. Teach for America, which has placed 2,800 elementary and high school teachers in underserved areas in the past five years—and only after being invited in—received \$2 million last year from AmeriCorps.

Julie Kennedy and other teachers like her are the kind of public employees politicians ought to be showering with praise, not threatening to wipe out. Kennedy is a fresh-thinking innovator who has immersed herself in the lives of her first-graders and her soccer players. "I love my students and I love my school," she says.

In addition to teaching and coaching, Kennedy waitresses 25 hours a week to pay back college loans. What little time is left goes to writing grant applications to expand her program. Why stop at five schools? she asks. Why limit the program only to girls? And why think only of Washington, when dozens of cities with millions of grade-school kids could be reached?

This is gimmickry? Gingrich's charge amounts to slander. AmeriCorps is in only its first year—crawling in its infancy, now getting to its feet—and already the House Appropriations Committee, following the speaker's calls for a "revolution," has plans to cut off its legs.

Is the Republican leadership's obsession to take down Bill Clinton so strong that 20,000 young people in AmeriCorps' 350 programs are to be sacrificed too? And where do Julie Kennedy's kids, who are also being tutored academically, go after school?